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Finding the Truth

An Incident in the School Work in Porto Rico

A True Story

The Woman's Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., One Hundred and Fifty-six Fifth Avenue, New York City

Reading the Truth

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1909

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THE first years of my life were spent in the country, without any intellectual or moral training. I saw no altars nor churches, the love of God was not spoken of to me, nor do I remember of having any conception whatever of a Supreme Being.

Arriving at school age, my parents moved to the city and, being of an inquisitive mind, by association with other children I soon learned many things and obtained some idea of God.

When a child my mother had me baptized in the Catholic Church, and gathering all her children about her she taught us to say prayers. The Lord's Prayer, the creed and doctrines of the Church were memorized and repeated by us word for word as they fell from the lips of our idolized mother. Unfortunately there was no spiritual teaching nor explanation, and no impression was made upon my soul.

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In school I had a teacher who was a free thinker, and he told us frankly that he went to church because the Government compelled him to do so. We were obliged to attend, also, and each Sunday were given a ticket on which was written "Value." This excused us from memorizing a difficult lesson. On the other hand, if we were not present at church on Sunday we were kept for an hour after school on Monday. So, to avoid a difficult task and to escape punishment I went to mass, and not from any religious motive whatever. My father being a Mason, I heard very little about the priests. At one time I wished to be an acolyte, and spoke of it to the priest without my father's knowledge. Upon learning this he went to the priest and told him never again to let me go into the vestry.

Under such circumstances my faith in God and the saints was established only through the lessons of my dear mother

The teacher made us learn the catechism and sacred history, but it being in the days when only the memory was trained and not the intellect, there were no spiritual results from this work.

Thus my boyhood passed carelessly by, the last years of which were made more serious by the lingering illness of my mother. Well do I remember the impression made upon my mind by a visit made with the family one day to the church at Hormigueros, where they went to pay a vow for the recovery of my mother, made by my grandmother, who was very Catholic and spent most of her time praying in her room.

It proved beyond the power of science to cure my beloved mother, and day by day she gradually grew worse. One day the doctor exclaimed: "I can do no more!" words which carried to my heart unspeakable sadness and deepest sorrow. At this moment my eldest sister, full of faith, called to me and said: "Come, let us pray to Saint Rafael and ask for her life." This was her favorite saint, and I, too, believed that he had all power.

While the words of science had left me hopeless, these words of faith gave me strength and courage, so I went with my sister to her room, where we plead for the life of our mother.

Such was my faith, and I had asked with such earnestness that I

went out of this room with the certainty that my mother would live. I went in to see her, and she seemed better. During the hours of the night and the following morning my heart was filled with quiet hope, but it was only a momentary relief from the struggles of my soul. I had to fortify myself for the inevitable blow, for in the afternoon of this day the eyes of the beloved mother of our home were forever closed. In one moment we lost her tender care and affection, and our happy home was turned into one of bitter mourning.

Where now were the saints? Where, then, St. Rafael? What was his power; where his influence? My poor, weak, untaught, unfounded faith went from me with the soul of her who had inspired it, and in that day a great moral change came upon me.

The awe and certain reverence with which I had looked upon the images in the church, which they told me represented certain Beings of influence and power in Heaven—this respect was gone, and I now looked upon them as wholly mundane, as I looked upon the crystal stream or the fragrant flower.

As I had gone to church at first

from compulsion and later with but weak faith, I now went for amusement only and to meet my girl friends, without a thought of devotion or saying prayers to the saints. And in this way the unfortunate years of my young manhood were spent.

At fourteen years of age I entered the college for higher education in Mayaguez. It would be impossible for me here to describe all the strife and contention of the next five years of my college life; equal struggle, I thought, no one had ever suffered and come out with any degree of success.

I pursued my studies with earnestness and pleasure. The contest between various classmates to rank first was intense, but by diligent effort I ever kept the place of honor. Being a boarding pupil I was given too free reins. I came out and went in at my own pleasure, and thus I was the envy of my companions, who, seeing my liberties and my intellectual triumphs, often wished themselves in my place, thinking I was happy.

Had they but known the truth they would have known that I was the most miserable of men; inasmuch as worldly pleasure and suc-

cess can never satisfy the longing of the better nature, nor can such sweeten the bitterness of ruined character.

The denial of the power of the saints was soon followed by the denial of the existence of God, and being a lover of study I began to search for the truth. Latin, French, physics, philosophy, etc., filled my brain with ideas and wrapped my soul in confusion until I began to believe myself a philosopher, arguing to-day Materialism, to-morrow Spiritualism, etc., the material dominating, and, being now without God or faith, it pleased me to be in a school where denying God they denied also the existence of the soul, arguing that the spirit is only the force of the material. The study of the philosophy which taught the infallibility of the Pope only served to strengthen my materialistic views.

At another time I was glad to believe that there was no thinking "I," only brain over which the blood had a powerful influence making impressions upon it by its rapid movement, at the same time the nerves by prodigious activity producing thought. I now took great delight in such authors as Balzac and Flaubert. My

favorite poets were Espronceda and Bartrina, such geniuses who, instead of edifying, have done such harm, burning with the light of their intelligence the flower of hope, of faith and love.

But was I convinced and satisfied after all this struggle? No, a thousand times no! When most materialistic and skeptical I read the works of "Lumen" de Flamarión and other such works, seeking some argument, some truth, that would lead me out of this unsatisfactory path into one of faith, where I might know that in me there was a soul and, above all, a Superior Being, who controlled all my destinies. In my soul there was the thirst which could be quenched only at the exhaustless fountain—God. But on account of my ignorance and lack of a spiritual guide I found no light.

In the course of events I graduated and received my college degree, obtained a teacher's certificate and was elected to teach in my native city. No one at this time advised me nor even suggested my being a teacher; it seemed to have been so ordered, and an irresistible power placed me as teacher over a school of children. I shall not dwell in detail upon the nine years of teaching

—Añasco, Rincón, Mayaguez and San Juan; all the Island knows how I labored for the progress of my country, but they do not know with what difficulty this irreverent unbeliever, this infidel, kept from his pupils the venomous poison of his own beliefs. I never denied God without a secret wish that my pupils might believe in Him. I made no display of my fatal unbelief. I was not happy with my ideas; my doubt exceeded that of Descartes, for I doubted even my own doubt and did not wish my pupils and children to share my belief. I talked to them of their duty of faith in God and tried to teach them such things as would be beneficial, but I was weak to speak of that which I did not feel and slow to teach what I myself did not believe.

And thus the years passed until my eldest son arrived at school age, and I was confronted with the serious problem of his education. I knew my duty was to teach him English, and I wanted him to have religious instruction, but I knew of no teacher to whom I cared to entrust my son's education. Walking down the street one day I met Miss M—— W——, who told me that she with Miss L—— was about to open a mis-

sion school in San Juan. Having met Miss W——, and knowing of her Christian teaching at Mayaguez, the thought at once came to me that here were the proper teachers for my son. Delighted with the opportunity, I at once made arrangements whereby my boy might come under the pure religious influence of these spiritual teachers. Leaving the child in this school, you will allow me a digression.

During the first years of my work as Professor of Science in the San Juan High School the question of having the Lord's Prayer repeated during the opening exercises was presented to the faculty. Although the idea seemed ridiculous to me, yet on seeing that the others all favored it I gave the vote which made it a unanimous rule.

The first morning of school arrived and after the singing of a song the principal in solemn and reverent voice lead, while all repeated with him the Lord's Prayer. Not all, for my lips were sealed in admiration of the picture of faith before me; teachers and pupils lifting their voices in earnest supplication to God before going to their daily work. I went out from this place heavy-hearted and ashamed,

feeling myself wholly unworthy of the high position which I held. I at once committed to memory in English this prayer, which so often in my childhood I had mechanically repeated in Spanish. As I now repeated it with the others, the great depths of its truth came to me. I now knew there was a God and in me an immortal soul. I never again doubted God, and I realized how far I was from being in harmony with Him.

Let us now return to my son's school. He often told me that his teacher wished him to attend some services in the church on Sunday, and, although I knew nothing of the nature of a Sunday school, I encouraged him to attend regularly, for I observed that there was being instilled into his young mind principles of faith.

One Sunday I determined to go with him, and entering the Sunday school room a beautiful picture greeted my eyes: A room full of eager children looking earnestly into the face of their teacher, who in simple language was explaining a lesson from the Bible, the story being made more impressive by means of chart and picture. I went into another room and there another

group of children were being instructed in the same interesting manner, this in the English language, while the other was in Spanish. In other rooms were yet other classes, each intent upon the study of the word of God. This was all new to me, and it is impossible for me to describe the profound impression made upon my mind as I looked and meditated upon this scene.

At the close of the lesson I was invited to remain for the English service. An irresistible force impelled me; I staid, and here I saw another picture no less beautiful. In the first impressionable children were being taught to know and to follow a loving Saviour, and in the second men and women firmly founded in the faith were reverently worshiping the same Divine Master.

The preacher read and expounded the words of Jesus in such a manner that the audience felt the influence of an irresistible something; which something I later knew to be the inherent power of the Word of God. My rebellious spirit was conquered, and in that most solemn moment of my life my transformation began. I now knew that this was the Truth for which I had sought so earnestly all these years,

and which could satisfy the longing of my soul and give me peace. I resolved that from that moment I would study the Bible, the treasure which during all the twenty-nine years of my life had been a sealed book to me.

Under the direction of Miss M—— I began to study the Bible, and little by little the forgiving grace of a merciful Father was revealed to me. The love of Christ entered my heart, I knew and accepted Him as my personal Saviour and He has made me free, transformed my life, given me a living faith, and fills my soul with the peace which the world can never give.

What a merciful Saviour! After almost thirty years of unbelief and sin He has saved me by His grace and put into my heart a longing for the salvation of my countrymen. What joy to teach them the way of eternal life.

Come and note the transformation in my home. All strife and bitterness gone, for God is there. Our highest aim now is to know and to do His holy will. The Bible is daily studied as at the family altar we hold precious communion with Him, and we gladly welcome each Sabbath day when united we assem-

ble at the church service for worship.

May the Lord richly bless all those who are sowing the seed of faith in this island; may He enlighten our understanding that the work of Christian missions may find a quick response in the hearts of the Porto Ricans.

[The writer of this sketch is one of the most prominent educators in Porto Rico, and is now supervising principal over the schools of a very important district. Here by his earnest Christian life he is exerting a wide influence, and because he is so well known he is a power for our great cause. Many, many there are here who stand just where this man stood, seeking "truth," waiting for the "gospel," for how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?"—Margaret Weyer.]

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FINDING THE TRUTH IN PORTO RICO

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When a child my mother had me baptized in the Catholic Church, and gathering all her children about her she taught us to say prayers. The Lord's Prayer, the creed and doctrines of the Church were memorized and repeated by us, word for word, as they fell from the lips of our idolized mother. Unfortunately, there was no spiritual teaching nor explanation, and no impression was made upon my soul.

In school I had a teacher who was a free thinker, and he told us frankly that he went to church because the Government compelled him to do so. We were obliged to attend, also, and each Sunday were given a ticket on which was written "Value." This excused us from memorizing a difficult lesson. On the other hand, if we were not present at church on Sunday we were kept for an hour after school on Monday. So, to avoid a difficult task, and to escape punishment, I went to mass, and not from any religious motive whatever. My father, being a Mason, I heard very little about the priests. At one time I wished to be an acolyte, and spoke of it to the priest without my father's knowledge. Upon learning this, he went to the priest and told him never again to let me go into the vestry.

Under such circumstances my faith in God and the saints was established only through the lessons of my dear mother. At last she became very ill, and neither the prayers of the saints nor skill of physicians seemed to help. When the doctor said, "I can do no more," my eldest sister, full of faith, said to me, "Let us pray to St. Rafael and ask for her life." This was her favorite saint, and I, too, believed he had all power. I believed she would live, but we lost her tender care and our house was turned to one of bitter mourning. Where now were the saints? My poor, weak, untaught, unfounded faith went from me with the soul of her who had inspired it, and in that day a great moral change came upon me.

The next five years were spent in college at Mayaguez—years of study, pleasure and liberty—always holding the place of honor among the students. But success can never satisfy the longing of the better nature nor sweeten the bitterness of ruined character. The denial of the power of the saints was soon followed by the denial of the existence of God, and I began to search for the truth. Latin, French, physics, philosophy filled my brain with ideas and wrapped my soul in confusion until I began to believe myself a philosopher, arguing to-day Materialism, to-morrow Spiritualism, etc., the material predominating. I took delight in the authors and books on these subjects.

But was I convinced and satisfied after these struggles? No, a thousand times no! In my soul there was a thirst for God, but on account of my ignorance and lack of a spiritual guide I found no light. An irresistible power drew me to teaching, and for nine years I labored for the progress of my country, and with difficulty kept from my pupils the venomous poisons of my beliefs. . . . We lived in San Juan when my boy arrived at school age, and I knew of no teacher to whom I cared to entrust his education. Walking down the street one day I met the teacher of the Presbyterian school, whom I had known at Mayaguez. I at once made arrangements for my boy to come under the pure, religious influence of the teachers of this school.

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